DANCE AND DESIGN WITH MARGIT GALANTER AND MARGOT LYSTRA (2010 - 2011)

Margit Galanter

Dance and Design with Margit Galanter and Margot Lystra / Embodied Language and Culture

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About

Withness is an exploration of site through the lenses of dance and design. It is an ongoing project between Margot Lystra, Margit Galanter, and the places they investigate. This site captures some of the extensive dialogues and practices that they have been developing over the past several years.

Blog Posts

Rearrangement (clearing = scattering)

August 18, 2011
By Margot

After family visits, rainy days, and summer flu, I finally return to withness work…

Clearing the site: people do this all the time. Weeding, sweeping, preparing land for new construction – all acts of removal, of deciding what should stay and what should go. But of course clearing one space is filling another: weeds deposited in the compost pile, dust swept into soil, rocks hauled from a field to its edge. How might one clear with awareness of the

corresponding accumulation – actively recognizing that a subtraction/addition relationship is in fact a zero-sum game?

I start the afternoon's work with sweeping the patio. The goal is not to clean, but to learn something new – sweeping as a way of seeing.

Pebbles, leaves, and seeds scatter easily, resisting accumulation. The activity quickly becomes one of clearing/collecting, with a focus on the sensation of pushing detritus and watching it land. Satisfying moments emerge…

(Clearing reveals one stone’s history of cracking.)

(Attempting to visually express the sensations of sifting and swishing.)

While I work the breeze kicks up and pushes dry leaves along the ground; sweeping reveals rainwater held between fallen leaves and the stones. I begin to recognize the “footprints” of various plants by watching which items settle on different sides of the garden: Juniper needles in one corner, Crabapple leaves in another, pebbles on the patio, Ailanthus seeds and twigs

everywhere. Working this way feels apt. I am one rearranger among many, each with our different motives – each making, collecting, absorbing, releasing, rearranging the materials at hand.

As a last afternoon task I set up a couple scenarios – things to watch over the next few days.

(Filling a particularly pocked stone with sweepings)

("Wrapping" a concrete block with fallen Crabapple leaves – in front of the compost, where skunks, opposums, and squirrels have been spied as of late.)

These are initial fumblings: each a little collage, a stage setting, a making as dialogue; a material "saying something" awaiting transpiration. Each a small rearrangment, sure to be rearranged yet again by someone else.

thirdspace and culminations that are really transitions

AUGUST 1, 2011
By Margit

To some extent, the research we are conducting here on *site* comes from both an experience and a desire to understand more about *liveness*. We are accessing the unknown while seeking familiarity. We are experiencing the intimacy and mystery of the world by reinventing little zones, letting the imaginal interact with the research. The site research is an ecological pursuit, an aesthetic one, and an ethical one – composition invokes all of this, and inversely, these realms are invoked by composing. It is clear that somehow through research site we are gaining insight on the power of place, that this relationality between practice and place is a nexus for creative practice, and this practice is a respectful dialog. The movement does something, and the design does something, and as they merge and as they find their distinctions, these categories in fact conjoin as physical practices that serve the lived experience, practice-based.

the lush Northwest

On my last day in Seattle, I looked at materially what I had gathered over my month's time in outdoor research: lists of practices, notes, and a ton of crow feathers. And of course amidst the objects, there were the experiences, and this question that emerged again – through this sensitizing, what did I offer, and what does it *do* to connect with places? This is exacerbated by the fact that my medium often is expressed in the ephemeral, the lived action experience.

On my final morning, I did not have the time nor the transportation to get back to the Arboreteum, so I allowed for a bit of wandering – having spent time in Ravenna Park, I went in quest of a site-based practicum that would stand-in for being at the site where I had spent so much time. I allowed for wandering aimlessly. I brought my detrital tools – the notes, the feathers, and wondered what kind of outcome would come of it.

the spot

I came across a little spot on a stream; isn't all water connected, do the streams speak to one another, and if I were to find a map of the watershed, does this water not flow right into Lake Washington in a way that is a direct connection to the water walkways? I imagined so. I allowed for what I have been calling *thirdspace* to enter in….

Thirdspace is a term used by contemporary post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha and cultural geographer Edward Soja, among others. The realm that in a way inspires this flexible term is inhabited by Henri Lefebvre, bell hooks, Jorges Luis Borges, Michel Foucault, and border warriors such as Gloria Anzaldua and Gayatri Spivak. In Soja's research into spatiality, he invites in a "thirding" of spatial imagination, implying the "real-and-imagined." When I learned of this term through Margot's library, I felt that I had found a usable term for something that we had been grappling with in our own collaborations (as well as in my own work) that had been non-rational, inclusive, dissolving, and involving the imagination in relation to sites. Thirdspace does not sleepily concur with the reductionism of binarisms. In a way, the research we have been doing is a call to invoke thirdspaces – nomadic and restless thinking like Lefebvre himself – that break down typical either-or through the power of what thirding *does;* it provides for spaces that are shifting, shimmering, not so clear-cut, be they a sense of space, identities, harmony, disciplines, practice, product, and whatever form they take, forever in some kind of motion, therefore alive.

Throughout my trips to the Arboreteum, I had been tracking the *thirdspace*, which in a way this blog is an instantiation of; real-and-imagined. What was the story that came along with the presence of experience, and what could be anything but?

As a culmination for my time in Seattle, I let the feathers go one by one in the water, each one letting go along with a different intention, then only later seeing what pattern emerged:

letting 'em go

and seeing 'em gather

It was a new version of our flinging.

I was intending to clear myself, to be more available to the site

I was molting these feathers that I had imagined I would create some gorgeous costume with, but instead returned them back to their basic territory, of course, altered.

I gave into chance, letting myself be moved

They created a centrifuge – the accumulation of water movement in a swirl.

Then, from all that, I danced. Danced for the water, for the crows, for a sense of *us*. As a way to access liveness, to invoke something more live in myself with which I could dance *with.*

And these pics are the best way for the time being I could come up with to let the practice be seen:

camera stills of something live

Clouds

JULY 27, 2011
By Margit

This post and the work I am currently doing with *site* might take me in a few different directions. I am working with image-based movement for many hours a day, then when I come to the site, my attention is quite cloud-like, affected by the resonance of movement and a particular approach.

What I am coming to understand in this time is that not only is there a potential for deep image life in a place itself, but as we

have been beginning to explore in this research, the imagination conjures kinds of places, and the richness of an image offers multiple points of interaction and direction. A particular site has its own uniqueness, and to spend time in it makes its way *glimmer.* And at the same time, a site leads to other sites, to *site-ness.* Image has that operational ability, too. And movement can be a gateway for different kinds of flow, and it can also be the image, itself. I am looking for new words for aspects of movement; there just aren't enough that match the multiplicity of the lived experience. And articulation seems to further what is possible, so this regenerative aspect is potent. We have words which show the connection between the imagination and language, but not so much for these words in connection with movement.

My time in Seattle is limited, so I would like to bridge the focus on *this* site with the ideas and actions that rise out of it so I can connect it to new places once back in the Bay Area.

I have been back to the Foster Island Arboreteum constellation several times. I am in continual awe with what the water does; in its deep rumble, the tone is a darkness the belies the life below. Here is an image-map that intends to give people basic information to orient to the place:

But don’t confuse the map with the territory. There is this tendency I have which I believe is learned and I have read is cultural, that “we” want the overview before entering into the image space. There is a grounding aspect of this for me, but once entered in, if the place captivates, the map dissolves as the intricacies of being-in-space emerge. This may be more pronounced since I am in the site on my own. With a collaborator, the conversation would be different.

I continue to observe the crows. I go to where they are settling to sleep. I listen to their sonorous caws as it turns into dusk. My movement is a kind of *tracking* of live creatures, and it invites me to find action that is whole-body and engaged with the environment, somehow as if the synapses are firing -> a mobilized body in interaction with the site, a sensitized back, and on all sides. This is definitely an influence of Open Source. I have been collecting piles of crow feathers, shiny and smooth. Is it because it has been raining that the feathers of the crows appear all over the University lawns and the Arboreteum fields, where they tend to sleep at night? A moulting season? The feathers feel like a kind of potentiality, that they come from the beings and then fall to the earth and then are available for reuse. Without my intervention, they would begin to decay in to the dirt, and with my taking of them, they ask to be used.

I lay under a monkey tree and sang and sang to it , made sounds in interaction with the birds, many of them the crows. Something about lying on the earth in and of itself does something powerful to the being, but what about as design? I wonder if to sing to a tree, to ask it questions, if there is a reciprocity? The sounds that seem to connect my own resonance dissolve some of the boundaries of my body experientially, since sound does that – it rolls through space and creates a kind of volume. I am interested in the kinds of shapes I experience the sounds makes, like sound clouds around the trees.

There has been a ton of rain here. And it is overcast, not so usual for Seattle in July. With this weather is a movement of the

clouds- they billow, they float heavily, and they brush through. Their qualities are useful to observe as image-states to interpret. In dancing cloud dances, I wonder, where can these researches lead?

These are physical/imaginal ways to map the space – the following crows, the becoming-clouds.

The water walkways and the clouds -these clouds had a heavy voluminosity to them- they hung with a droopy buoyancy. To match this while navigating the slow floating movements of the docks was a live project, though here it all looks so still.

Ways of looking

JULY 24, 2011
By Margot

Gardens are places of vision, action, aesthetic intervention. Engaging a garden, one manifests their desire. What should I

plant? Native shrubs that need little water? Colorful but resource-needy perennials? Lettuce to eat for dinner?

But these decisions are not purely matters of the gardener's desire. They're also entangled in collaboration – between gardener, plants, weather, minerals, climate. Replenishing soil is a joint project of moisture, compost, and earthworms. One plant's survival may depend on another's, as with a shade-loving fern and the tree above it. Though gardeners may imagine themselves in charge, they actually respond to a multitude of factors and beings beyond their control.

When I enter this garden newly under my care, I'm often captivated by the beauty of what is already there. The deliciousness of seeing provokes stillness on my part: a desire to absorb, to invest action in the eyes. A gentle growing tangle of creeping plants over stone, smattered with seeds from a backyard tree, is enough to tantalize me into a watching reverie, body slipping into stillness.

Some moments I feel myself become isolated by this looking. Other moments, I become engaged. The difference seems to lie in whether seeing inhibits or instigates other actions.

For example: upon glimpsing something visually pleasing, I may find myself wanting to capture it – to retain and record the moment of aesthetic satisfaction rather than allow it to be disrupted. To photograph it, for example. Attempting capture can

distance me from the garden's beings: the appearance of seeds, vines, sun, and rock becomes more important than their tendencies, actions, or desires. In the moment of capture I place myself in charge, seeking to frame the actions of other garden dwellers as a visual tableau for human enjoyment.

In contrast to looking for visual pleasure, looking for information seems to engender action. Curious looking inspires touching things, moving them, turning them over to see what is on the other side. What emerges is a certain kind of directionless doing. Weak goals (i.e. to answer: "what is that over there?" Or, "why are these seeds collecting in this nook?') inspire investigative action. The pleasure of seeing is thereby activated as part of a broader set of actions – it becomes the beginning of an exploration rather than the end. In the face of unknown outcomes, I can no longer imagine myself in control of the situation. As John Cage described (in *Silence*):

I am still really thoroughly puzzled by this way of composing by observing imperfections in paper. It is this being thoroughly puzzled that makes it possible for me to work.

At issue in the way of seeing is not my actual control over the garden, but rather what forms of relationship I practice when in the garden. In this case, "practice" is a matter of doing to learn. In order to get better at listening to other beings, I must disrupt habits that reduce my capacity to perceive. I must learn to relinquish the illusion that I am in charge of the garden's beings – and learn to perceive the ways that they are in charge of me.

Mutualism

JULY 15, 2011
By Margit

The Seattle site I am exploring thru dance and design is a section of the Arboreteum Waterfront Trail. Around and through two Islands, Foster and Marsh, there are a set of walkways and floating walkways. The area attracts a rich array of animal life, plant life, and human activity. The walkways are an assemblage of

cement, wood, metal and moist earth (this is Seattle, albeit July). Parts of the walkways hinge and leverage to allow for boats to pass. In July, the land is bursting with vibrant greens, and the water is deep in tone. It is edge zone.

The whole of the Arboreteum is one of the evening resting places for the crows. For Physical Experiment #1, I moved around the walkways in interaction with the crows, both attempting to not interrupt their activities and moving with a camera so as to catch them in flight, a kind of physical mirroring with an image-catch. This proved to be an exciting challenge.

Two photos from the attempts:

Some of the many aspects that attract me to this location is confluence of the beings and the spaciousness.

The interdependence of mutualism for me was first understood consciously in the crows in Seattle, though my whole childhood in NYC with the roaches, rats and pigeons existed before I had the language. The inspiration for my movement experiment seemed to come from the environment, which *moved me*.

Physical Experiment #2

Working off of the ideas that Margot and I have written in the past, I took some time just to be there and listen (whole body listening)

garden wild

JULY 5, 2011
By Margot

This summer I will be practicing withness work in a scraggly garden – getting to know the place's live-ness, its habits and desires. Here are some initial observations. Above, snail tracks on a cobweb.

A dappling: rocks, leaves, light.

Fire-pit charred wood, rain-wet then sun-dried.

Glimpse through the tape that holds the crack in the pane of the back door window.

More soon…

Margot

Shimmering Ithaca

MAY 28, 2011
By Margit

Shimmering Ithaca
Investigating Site through Dance and Design
a collaboration between
Margit Galanter
movement investigator, dance poet
Margot Lystra
landscape architect, MA/PhD student
Workshop
Saturday June 4, 3-5pm - location to be announced*
Explore methods for moving and making
in conversation with site. Open to all.
Showing of Work
Thursday June 9, 6-7pm - location to be announced*
Living installation/showing, followed by
a discussion about the work.
* Locations posted online at withness.wordpress.com,
or call the Shimmering hotline at (917) 617-3939.
Sponsored in part by a Grant from
the Cornell Council for the Arts.

Treehouse Project

AUGUST 23, 2010
By Margot

SEEDS (Somatic Experiments in Earth, Dance, + Science) 2010
Artists in Residence

The following is a rough draft of materials we presented on July 17, 2010, as part of the SEEDS Public Events Community Day. This project is the beginning of a collaboration on the relationship to site as seen through the lens of dance and landscape architecture.

Our practices evolved out of the rich intersection of researching site and making in it. For this project, we allowed ourselves to hang out in uncertainty, giving ourselves ample space to figure out how to act and what to do in relation to a living site. The result is a practice that is both ethical and aesthetic.

Included here are some of the primary core ideas we developed over the course of our residency, a few of the the tools we practiced, and the experiment proposal we conducted with the people present that morning.

Core Ideas

THE SITE IS ALIVE. Working in an environment is an ensemble activity. A living or fallen tree, an old stone wall, a charismatic accumulation of branches, is a thing/being with its own expressiveness, history, self-organization, and live-ness. Therefore working in any environment is working in dialogue with numerous partners.

RELATIONSHIP IS THE GROUND. Being and doing are first and foremost a form of interrelationship. Objects are not sealed, but interpermeable – thus all actions are inherently interactions.

LISTENING. Essential to partnering with a thing/being is learning its language, its self-organization, so that we can meet it in

consideration of its terms and tendencies. In this way we explore difference towards mutuality.

CONSONANCE. When one's action succeeds at being both deeply personal and fully interactive, a form of consonance emerges, forming a tangible, mutually open connection between individual action and other entities in the world.

SHIMMERING. This work operates at the edge of perceptibility, occupying the edge between "as usual" and something more. In this way we tap into the "nature of" the thing/being and glow or amplify it.

TIME. It takes time to attune to the richness of landscape. Allowing this time provides for fascinations and connections to emerge, rather than thinking them up.

Some Tools

- work something to the shimmering edge of perceptibility

- use randomness (e.g. flinging) to work with the nature of a thing

- set up precarious structures – ones that ask to fall or be felled

- find vividness by releasing out through

- mend something

- give yourself a simple, compelling task and live in that task

Each of these tools elicits a myriad of questions regarding our role in the natural world, enabling us to confront and explore how to act and what to do in relation to our environment.

An Experiment for the Participants of our Presentation:

Directions

At first, take time to explore and see what arises. After a time, find some entity out there that is of interest to you and try to

understand it by making tasks that will reveal its self-organization. Whether this task/action focuses on sensing or on making something, its purpose is to build a relationship with a thing-being within this environment. If you find a task that really works, stick with it and see what grows.